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THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOLK-TALES AND MYTHS<sup>1</sup>

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THE collections of folk-tales and myths of all continents, but particularly of North America, that have been accumulated during the last few decades, have yielded the definite result that the incidents of tales have a very wide distribution, that they have been carried from tribe to tribe, even from continent to continent, and have been assimilated to such an extent that rarely only there is any internal evidence that would indicate what is of native and what of foreign origin.

Although these incidents have a wide distribution, they have developed characteristic peculiarities in restricted parts of the territory in which they occur. I will illustrate this by means of some examples selected from among the folk-tales of the north Pacific coast of America.

An excellent illustration is presented by the North American tale of the Bungling Host. The fundamental idea of the story, the failure of the attempt to imitate magical methods of procuring food, is common to the whole North American Continent, apparently with the sole exception of California and of the Arctic coast. The incidents, however, show considerable variation. Confined to the north Pacific coast are the tricks of letting oil drip from the hands, of obtaining fishroe by striking the ankle, and of letting berries ripen by the song of a bird. The widely spread trick of cutting or digging meat out of the host's body is practically unknown on the north Pacific coast. The host's trick of killing his children, who revive, which forms part of the Bungling Host tale in the state of Washington and on the Plateaus, is well known on the north Pacific coast. However, it does not occur as part of this story. It is entirely confined to stories of visits to the countries of supernatural beings.

Similar observations may be made in regard to the prolific test theme. The dangerous entrance to the house of the supernatural beings is represented among the northern tribes of the north Pacific coast by the closing cave or by the closing horizon; among the tribes farther to the south, by a snapping door; on the western plateaus, by animals that watch the door of the house. Heat tests occur frequently, but in some regions the heat is applied by baking the youth in an

<sup>1</sup> Based on an investigation of the mythology of the Tsimshian, to be published in the Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

oven or boiling him in a kettle; in others by sending him into an overheated sweat-lodge or placing him near a large fire. More important differences may be observed in the general setting of the test tales, which in some areas are tests of the son-in-law; in others, matches between the inhabitants of a village and their visitors.

Other examples of the local development of the plot of a story by the introduction of specific incidents occur, as in the north Pacific coast story of raven killing the deer, whom, according to the Alaskan tale, he strikes with a hammer, while in the more southern form he pushes him over a precipice. Similarly, in a story of a rejected lover who is made beautiful by a supernatural being the magic transformation is accomplished in the northern versions by bathing the youth in the bathtub of the supernatural being, while in the south he is given a new head.

In other cases the geographical differentiation of the tales is not quite so evident, because different types of stories overlap. This is the case in the widely spread story of the deserted child. Tales in which a youth gives offense by being lazy or by wasting food belong to Alaska. Another type, in which a girl is deserted because she has married a dog, belongs to British Columbia; but the two types overlap in distribution. This particular theme occurs in a much wider area on the American Continent, and other types may easily be recognized in the stories of the Plains Indians.

Tales of marriages with supernatural beings or animals are often found in the form of the abduction of a girl who has unwittingly offended an animal. This type seems to belong primarily to Alaska, while the theme of helpful animals that succor unfortunate and innocent sufferers is much more frequent among the tribes of British Columbia.

All these examples illustrate that there are a number of simple plots, which have a wide distribution, and which are elaborated by a number of incidents that must be interpreted as literary devices peculiar to each area. In all these cases the incidents obtain their peculiar significance by being worked into different plots.

On the other hand, we find also certain incidents that have a very wide distribution and occur in a variety of plots. Many examples of these are given in the annotations to all the more important recent collections of folk-tales. The local character of folk-tales is largely determined by typical associations between incidents and definite plots.

In most of the cases here discussed the plot has a general human character, so that the processes of invention and diffusion of plots must be looked at from a point of view entirely different from that to be applied in the study of invention and diffusion of incidents. The latter are, on the whole, fantastic modifications of every-day

experiences, and not likely to develop independently with a frequency sufficient to explain their numerous occurrences over a large area. On the other hand, the stories of a deserted child, of contests between two villages, of a rejected lover, and other similar ones, are so closely related to every-day experiences, and conform to them so strictly, that the conditions for the rise of such a framework of literary composition are readily given. Nevertheless the plots that are characteristic of various areas should be studied from the point of view of their literary characteristics and of their relation to the actual life of the people.

An attempt of this kind has been made by Dr. John R. Swanton,<sup>2</sup> who enumerates a number of formulas of tales of the north Pacific coast. In this area the following plots occur a number of times:

1. A woman marries an animal, is maltreated by it, and escapes.
2. A woman marries an animal, who pities and helps her; she returns with gifts.
3. Men or women marry animals and receive gifts; crest stories.
4. Men obtain crests through adventures in hunting or traveling.
5. Parents lose their children; a new child is born owing to the help of some supernatural being; adventures of this child.
6. A man maltreats his wife, who receives help from supernatural beings.
7. The adventures of hunters; they meet dangers, which the youngest or oldest one overcomes.
8. War between two tribes, due to the seduction of a woman and the murder of her lover.

All these stories show a unity of the underlying idea. They are built up on some simple event that is characteristic of the social life of the people and that stirs the emotion of the hearers. Some tales of this type are elaborated in great detail, and therefore conform to our own literary standards. To this class belongs, for instance, the tale of a deserted prince. It is told that a prince fed eagles instead of catching salmon. In winter when food was scarce he was deserted by his relatives, but was helped by the eagles, who gave him food. It is told in great detail how larger and larger animals were sent to him. When the prince had become rich he sent some food to the only person who had taken pity on him. By chance his good luck was discovered and he rescued the tribe that was starving and married the chief's daughter.

Another tale of this kind is "Growing-up-like-one-who-has-a-grandmother." This is a tale of another poor boy who is helped by a supernatural being, overcomes all the young men of the village in various

<sup>2</sup> John R. Swanton, "Types of Haida and Tlingit Myths," *American Anthropologist*, N. S., Vol. VII., 1905, p. 94.

contests, and thus obtains the right to marry the chief's daughter. The chief feels humiliated, deserts him, and the youth kills a lake monster. When wearing its skin he is able to kill sea game, but finally is unable to take off the skin and must remain in the sea.

Besides these, there are a large number of complex tales of fixed form, which are put together very loosely. There is no unity of plot, but the story consists of the adventures of a single person. I do not refer here to the disconnected anecdotes that are told of some favorite hero, such as we find in the Raven legend or in the Transformer tales, but of adventures that form a fixed sequence and are always told as one story. Examples of this kind are quite numerous.

It is noticeable that only a few of the complex tales of the last-named type are known to several tribes. Although enough versions have been recorded to show that in each area the connection between the component parts of the story is firm, the whole complex does not migrate over any considerable distance. On the contrary, the parts of the tale have the tendency to appear in different connections. This point is illustrated, for instance, by the story of a man who is deserted on a sea-lion rock and is taken into the house of the wounded sea-lions whom he cures. This story appears in quite different connections in various regions. Other examples of similar kind are quite numerous.

The literary device that holds together each one of these tales consists in the use of the interest in the hero that has been created by the introductory story, and that makes the audience desirous of knowing about his further deeds and adventures. The greater the personal interest in the hero, the more marked is the desire to attach to his name some of the favorite exploits that form the subject of folk-tales. I presume this is the reason why in so many cases the introductory tales differ enormously, while the adventures and exploits themselves show a much greater degree of uniformity. This happens particularly in the case of tales of culture heroes. When a large number of the same exploits is thus ascribed to the heroes of different tribes, it seems to happen easily that the heroes are identified. Therefore I imagine that the steps in the development of a culture-hero myth may have been in many cases the following: An interesting story told of some personage; striking and important exploits ascribed to him; similar tales of these personages occurring among various tribes; identification of the heroes of different tribes. While I do not assume that this line of development has occurred every single time—and it seems to me rather plausible that in other cases the introductory story and the adventures may have come to be associated in other ways—it may be considered as proved that introduction and adventures do not belong together by origin, but are results of later association. The great diversity of associations of this type compels us to take this point of view.

On the whole, in many forms of primitive literature, the interest in the personality of the hero is a sufficient means of establishing and maintaining these connections. Nevertheless there are a few cases at least in which the adventures conform to a certain definite character of the hero. This is the case in northwestern America in the Raven, Mink, and Coyote tales, in which greed, amorous propensities, and vaingloriousness are the chief characteristics of the three heroes. In tales that have a more human background these tendencies are hardly ever developed.

The recorded material shows also that the imagination of primitive man revels in the development of certain definite themes, that are determined by the character of the hero, or that lend themselves in other ways to variation. Thus in Alaskan tales Raven's voraciousness, that induces him to cheat people and to steal their provisions, is an ever-recurring theme, the point of which is regularly the attempt to induce the people to run away and leave their property. Mink's amorousness has led to the development of a long series of tales referring to his marriages, all of which are of the same type. The strong influence of a pattern of thought on the imagination of the people is also illustrated by tales of marriages between animals and men or women and a few other types to which I referred before.

The artistic impulses of a people are not always satisfied with the loose connections of stories, brought about by the individuality of the hero, or strengthened by the selection of certain traits of his character illustrated by the component anecdotes. We find a number of cases in which a psychological connection of the elements of the complex story is sought. An example of this kind is found in the Raven legend of British Columbia, in which a number of unrelated incidents are welded into the form of an articulate whole. The adventures of the Steelhead Salmon, the Grizzly Bear, and Cormorant, are thus worked into a connected series. Raven kills Steelhead Salmon because he wants to use it to deceive Grizzly Bear. He holds part of the salmon in front of his body, so as to make the Bear believe that he has cut himself. Thus he induces the Bear to imitate him and to kill himself. Finally he tears out the tongue of Cormorant, who had witnessed the procedure, so that he may not tell. Another excellent case from the same region is the story of Raven's son and Thunderbird. Raven has seduced a girl, and their son is stolen by Thunderbird. In order to take revenge, he makes a whale of wood, then kills Pitch in order to calk the whale, and by its means drowns the Thunderbird. Among other tribes the same tale occurs in another connection. The animals have a game, and Thunderbird wins. The defeated guests are invited, and the host's wife produces berries by her song. Then the Thunderbird abducts her, and the revenge of the animals by means

of the whale follows. In the former group of tales the incident describing the death of Pitch is brought in, which ordinarily occurs as an independent story.

In these cases we find the same incidents in various connections, and this makes it clear that it would be quite arbitrary to assume that the incident developed as part of one story and was transferred to another one. We must infer that the elements were independent and have been combined in various ways. There certainly is nothing to prove that the connection in which an incident occurs in one story is older and nearer to the original form than one in which it occurs in another story.

The distribution of plots and incidents of North American folklore presents a strong contrast when compared to that found in Europe. European folk-tales, while differing in diction and local coloring, exhibit remarkable uniformity of contents. Incidents, plots, and arrangement are very much alike over a wide territory. The incidents of American lore are hardly less widely distributed; but the make-up of the stories exhibits much wider divergence, corresponding to the greater diversification of cultural types. It is evident that the integration of European cultural types has progressed much further during the last two or three thousand years than that of the American types. Cultural contrasts like those between the Northwest coast and the Plateaus, or between the Great Plains and the arid Southwest, are not easily found in Europe. Excepting a few of the most outlying regions, there is a great underlying uniformity in material culture, social organization, and beliefs, that permeates the whole European continent, and that is strongly expressed in the comparative uniformity of folk-tales.

For this reason European folk-lore creates the impression that the whole stories are units, that their cohesion is strong, and the whole complex very old. The analysis of American material, on the other hand, demonstrates that complex stories are new, that there is little cohesion between the component elements, and that the really old parts of tales are the incidents and a few simple plots.

Only a few stories form an exception to this rule—such as the Magic Flight or Obstacle myth—which are in themselves complex, the parts having no inner connection, and which have nevertheless a very wide distribution.

From a study of the distribution and composition of tales we must then infer that the imagination of the natives has played with a few plots, which were expanded by means of a number of motives that have a very wide distribution, and that there is comparatively little material that seems to belong to any one region exclusively, so that it might be considered as of autochthonous origin. The character of the folk-tales of each region lies rather in the selection of preponderant themes, in the style of plots, and in their literary development.

The supernatural element in tales shows a peculiar degree of variability. In a study of the varying details it appears a number of times that stories which in one region contain fantastic elements are given a much more matter-of-fact setting in others. I take my examples again from the north Pacific coast. In the tale of Raven's battle with South Wind we find in most cases an incident of an animal flying into the enemy's stomach, starting a fire, and thus compelling him to cough. In the Tsimshian version he simply starts a smudge in his house. In most tales of the liberation of the Sun the magical birth of Raven plays an important part, but among the Eskimo he invades the house by force or by ordinary fraud. In the Tsimshian tale of the origin of Raven a dead woman's child flies up to the sky, while the Tlingit tell the same tale without any supernatural element attached to it. Another case of this kind is presented by the wedge test as recorded among the Lower Thompson Indians. In most versions of this tale a boy who is sent into the open crack of a tree and whom his enemy tries to kill by knocking out the spreading-sticks, escapes miraculously when the tree closes. In the more rationalistic form of the tale he finds a hollow which he keeps open by means of supports given me. The available material gives me the impression that the loss of supernatural elements occurs, on the whole, near the border of the area in which the tales are known, so that it might be a concomitant of the fragmentary character of the tales. That loss of supernatural elements occurs under these conditions, appears clearly from the character of the Masset and Tlingit tales recorded by Swanton. In some of the Tlingit tales the supernatural elements are omitted, or weakened by saying that the person who had an incredible experience was out of his head. In the Masset series there are many cases in which the supernatural element is simply omitted. I am not prepared to say in how far this tendency may be due to conflicts between the tales and Christian teaching or in how far it may be due simply to the break with the past. The fact remains that the stories lost part of their supernatural character when they were told in a new environment.

I think it would be wrong to generalize and to assume that such loss of supernatural elements is throughout the fate of tales, for the distribution of explanatory tales shows very clearly that it is counter-balanced by another tendency of tales to take on new supernatural significance.

An additional word on the general theory of mythology. I presume I shall be accused of an entire lack of imagination and of failure to realize the poetic power of the primitive mind if I insist that the attempt to interpret mythology as a direct reflex of the contemplation of nature is not sustained by the facts.

Students of mythology have been accustomed to inquire into the



origin of myths without much regard to the modern history of myths. Still we have no reason to believe that the myth-forming processes of the last ten thousand years have differed materially from modern myth-making processes. The artifacts of man that date back to the end of the glacial period are so entirely of the same character as those left by the modern races, that I do not see any reason why we should suppose any change of mentality during this period. Neither is there any reason that would countenance the belief that during any part of this period intertribal contact has been materially different from what it is now. It seems reasonable to my mind, therefore, to base our opinions on the origin of mythology on a study of the growth of mythology as it occurs under our own eyes.

The facts that are brought out most clearly from a careful analysis of myths and folk-tales of an area like the northwest coast of America are that the contents of folk-tales and myths are largely the same, that the data show a continual flow of material from mythology to folk-tale and *vice versa*, and that neither group can claim priority. We furthermore observe that contents and form of mythology and folk-tales are determined by the conditions that determined early literary art.

The formulas of myths and folk-tales, if we disregard the particular incidents that form the substance with which the framework is filled in, are almost exclusively events that reflect the occurrences of human life, particularly those that stir the emotions of the people. If we once recognize that mythology has no claim to priority over novelistic folklore, then there is no reason why we should not be satisfied to explain the origin of these tales as due to the play of imagination with the events of human life.

It is somewhat different with the incidents of tales and myths, with the substance that gives to the tales and myths their highly imaginative character. It is true enough that these are not directly taken from every-day experience; that they are rather contradictory to it. Revival of the dead, disappearance of wounds, magical treasures, and plentiful food obtained without labor, are not every-day occurrences, but they are every-day wishes; and is it not one of the main characteristics of the imagination that it gives reality to wishes? Others are exaggerations of our experiences; as the power of speech given to animals, the enormous size of giants, or the diminutive stature of dwarfs. Or they are the materialization of the objects of fear; as the imaginative difficulties and dangers of war and the hunt, or the monsters besetting the steps of the unwary traveler. Still other elements of folk-lore represent ideas contrary to daily experiences; such as the numerous stories that deal with the absence of certain features of daily life, as fire, water, etc., or those in which birth or death are brought about by unusual means. Practically all

the supernatural occurrences of mythology may be interpreted by these exaggerations of imagination.

So far as our knowledge of mythology and folk-lore of modern people goes, we are justified in the opinion that the power of imagination of man is rather limited, that people much rather operate with the old stock of imaginative happenings than invent new ones.

There is only one point, and a fundamental one, that is not fully covered by the characteristic activity of imagination. It is the fact that everywhere tales attach themselves to phenomena of nature; that they become sometimes animal tales, sometimes tales dealing with the heavenly bodies. The distribution of these tales demonstrates clearly that the more thought is bestowed upon them by individuals deeply interested in these matters—by chiefs, priests, or poets—the more complex do they become, and the more definite are the local characteristics that they develop. The facts, however, do not show that the elements of which these tales are composed have any immediate connection with the phenomena of nature, for most of them retain the imaginative character just described.

The problem of mythology must therefore rather be looked for in the tendency of the mind to associate single tales with phenomena of nature and to give them an interpretative meaning. I do not doubt that when the anthropomorphization of sun and moon, of mountains and animals, had attracted stories of various kinds to them, then the moment set in when the observation of these bodies and of the animals still further stimulated the imagination and led to new forms of tales, that are the expressions of the contemplation of nature. I am, however, not prepared to admit that the present condition of myths indicates that these form any important part of primitive mythology.

That European myths happen to have developed in this direction—presumably by long-continued reinterpretation and systematization at the hands of poets and priests—does not prove that we must look for a poetic interpretation of nature as the primary background of all mythologies.

The mythological material collected in recent years, if examined in its relation to folk-tales and in its probable historical development, shows nothing that would necessitate the assumption that it originated from the contemplation of natural phenomena. It rather emphasizes the fact that its origin must be looked for in the imaginative tales dealing with the social life of the people.